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Ethical conflict and job satisfaction of public relations practitioners[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study attempted to explore the linkage between ethical conflict and job satisfaction, causes of ethical conflicts, and consequences of job dissatisfaction of public relations practitioners. The findings show that many practitioners confirmed the existence of ethical conflict in their workplace and suggest that ethical challenges are largely triggered by top management's ethical standard. Although practitioners resolved conflicts by leaving their companies, they also recognized the hope in resolving the ethical challenges that they had faced. Participants emphasized the importance of an open communication environment, the support of internal stakeholders, and a high professional standard.

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Scholars have explored job satisfaction as an index to measure the desirability of certain work conditions, because it reflects the quality of work life and psychological well-being of workers (Pincus, Knipp, & Rayfield, 1990; Pugliesi, 1999). Consequently it is closely related to the steady prosperity of a profession and employers.

Public relations scholarship has given intermittent attention to job satisfaction. However, the ethics issue has not been a focus of any previous studies on public relations practitioners' job satisfaction. Thus, this study is one of the first to examine voices from real workplaces. This research depicts the types of ethics concerns or distresses that public relations practitioners experience and how the experience affects the quality of work life in the public relations profession.

1. Literature review

1.1. Public relations and job satisfaction

Job satisfaction study of public relations was initially conducted to defend public relations' occupational progress as a unique profession (McKee, Nayman, & Lattimore, 1975; Pratt, 1986; Shin, 1989). Scholarship found various job satisfaction levels in terms of practitioners' managerial roles and participation in the decision-making process (Broom & Dozier, 1986), organizational communication structure (Grunig, 1992; Pincus, 1986), public relations models (Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Karadjov, Kim, & Karavasilev, 2000; Kim & Hon, 1998) and the gender gap (Rentner & Bissland, 1990). Meanwhile, the linkage between ethics issues and job satisfaction in public relations has not yet been explored, although ethics is regarded as an essence of professionalization (Day, Dong, & Robins, 2001; Pratt & Renter, 1989).

RQ1: To what extent are practitioners' perceived ethical conflict and their job satisfaction linked?

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Table 1
The linkage between ethical conflict and job satisfaction.

Categories		Frequency
Experience of ethical conflict N = 105 (100%)	No: I have rarely faced ethics conflicts.	34.3% (36)
	Yes: I have experienced ethics conflicts.	65.7% (69)
		100% (105)
Consequence of the conflict N = 69 (100%)	1. I left the employer (turnover).	21.7% (15)
	2. Ethical conflict is very closely related to my job satisfaction.	34.78% (24)
	3. Ethical conflicts hurt my workplace well-being.	11.6% (8)
The causes of ethical conflict N = 69 (100%)	1. When the bosses or top management make and enforce ethically inappropriate decisions.	21.7% (15)
	2. Being forced to be silent.	10.14% (7)
	3. When I was not given the option to discuss the ethical issue.	10.14% (7)
	4. Lack of professionalism	4.35% (5)
	5. Feeling of unfairness or injustice.	10.14% (7)
	1. It is hard to get ethical things done.	4.35% (5)
	2. Miscellaneous.	5.80% (4)

1.2. Public relations and ethics

Scholars have conducted several empirical studies on public relations ethics. Most of the empirically investigated studies examined practitioners' moral values (Boynton, 2003; Kim, 2003; O'Neill, 1986; Ryan & Martinson, 1984; Wright, 1985) or some ethical decision-making process (Bowen, 2004b; Lieber, 2008). Research, however, has not yet addressed the impact of ethical practice on the work life of public relations practitioners.

1.3. Ethics and job satisfaction

Scholarship in business ethics research has conducted numerous studies to investigate the determinants of ethical behaviors in both individual and structural level. Especially, many studies focus on organizational factors of ethical behavior/ethical decision-making such as ethical climate (Ambrose, Arnaud, & Schminke, 2007; Deshpande, 1996), code of ethics/ethical policy (Cowton & Thompson, 2000; Schwartz, 2000), ethics training program (Delaney & Sockell, 1992) and organizational structure (Ferrell & Skinner, 1988). On the other hand, very little research has investigated business-ethics consequences, such as employees' job satisfaction, stress, motivation, commitment, and job performance, in comparison with the many studies to explain organizational factors of ethical behaviors in business (Koh & Boo, 2001).

RQ2: In what cases do public relations practitioners perceive ethical conflict?

RQ3: What are the primary consequences of practitioners' perceived ethical challenges and job dissatisfaction?

2. Method

An open-ended question was adapted to collect qualitative data in a large online survey to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) members on August and September in 2008. The question asks participants when it is they perceive ethical conflict and to what degree is it related to their satisfaction with their work. Independent PR consultants, firm owners, and educators were excluded from the sample. The response rate was about 5.6% (343 out of 6126), and 30.6% (105) of the total participants answered the open-ended question. Thus, 105 answers became the total sample for this study.

Most (79.3%) of the respondents were women, and the average age was 43.56. 46.2% had a college degree, and 50.9% had a master or higher degree. Average experience in public relations industries was 15–16 years.

3. Results

3.1. Results of RQ1

While only 34.3% (36) respondents answered that they rarely faced ethical conflict, 65.7% (69) respondents said they had experienced an ethical conflict. Participants who have not experienced the ethical dissonance simply said, e.g., "I have rarely faced ethics conflicts" (Table 1).

However, people who suffered from such conflict sometimes emphasized their feelings with capitalized characters in the text, such as "VERY" and "EXTREMELY." The ethical concerns seem, at times to be so serious that practitioners undervalue

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